

BACK FENCE

Veterans
CONTINUING TO SERVETHIS WEEK: Soldiering on and
supporting those in combat.

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Gen. Douglas MacArthur's well-known personal effects, located at Norfolk's MacArthur Memorial.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FADING AWAY?

MacArthur Was Right When He Said: 'Old Soldiers Never Die'

To show how far this country has come (or gone) in 55 years, when Gen. Douglas MacArthur was fired by President Harry Truman for suggesting that the Korean War needed expansion, Congress was for the most part on MacArthur's side. Truman, like LBJ, was so unpopular that he pulled himself out of consideration for a second elected term, and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower became the first

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Republican President since the Depression began several decades earlier. After having been relieved, Gen. MacArthur was summoned to a joint session of Congress, where he gave one of the most eloquent, oft-quoted speeches of his time.

Following his lamentations at leaving after 52 years of service to his country, MacArthur's observation, "Old soldiers never die. They just fade away," seemed fitting. I remember a song, "Old Soldiers Never Die" and, while living as a dependent in occupied Japan, seeing thousands of Japanese weeping on the street for their conqueror who'd resisted the temptation of humiliating his defeated enemy.

Eleven years after officially being fired by President Truman, Gen. MacArthur was at West Point giving his moving final salute to his beloved Corps of Cadets — and his thoughts on his and their calling.

Gen. MacArthur's Words

"This does not mean that you are warmongers. On the contrary, the soldier above all other people prays for peace, for he must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war. But always in our ears ring the ominous words of Plato, that wisest of all philosophers: 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.'"

"The shadows are lengthening for me. The twi-

light is here. My days of old have vanished — tone and tint. They have gone glimmering through the dreams of things that were. Their memory is one of wondrous beauty, watered by tears, and coaxed and caressed by the smiles of yesterday. I listen then, but with thirsty ear, for the witching melody of faint bugles blowing reveille, of far drums beating the long roll.

"In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange, mournful mutter of the battlefield. But in the evening of my memory I come back to West Point. Always there echoes and re-echoes: Duty, Honor, Country.

"Today marks my final roll call with you. But I want you to know that when I cross the river, my last conscious thoughts will be of the Corps, and the Corps, and the Corps."

Now that eloquence didn't exactly sound as though it came from a soldier who had faded away. Gen. MacArthur's ability to express himself in a manner such that his associates and subordinates virtually worshipped him, makes modern-day bumper-sticker-and-soundbite speechifying seem simplistic and childish. His elegant yet eloquent style could and did move mountains.

Those who were present on the deck of the USS *Missouri* accepting the Japanese surrender will never forget it — just for, "Forrest Gump"-like, being that close to The Great MacArthur. Those who'd waded ashore with him when he fulfilled his "I shall return" pledge in the Philippines, will never forget it. No words uttered either by President Truman or any single member of Congress during 1951 will be remembered as was his "Old Soldiers" speech.

And yet, he really did fade away. For all his forcefulness and leadership — and all his eloquence and grandiosity — he faded away to a memory at West Point and at the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, and the memory to many of a life well-lived and admired by most.

One of Newton's Laws of Physics states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. So just as Gen. MacArthur was able to inspire his generation by his positive eloquence and deeds, those who followed weren't as eloquent and were swallowed up by the negativism surrounding the war in Vietnam. Unable to articulate even simple policies, "leaders" were made to look ridiculous by charlatans with unscrupulous goals. The wrong people were allowed to usurp the warrior's glory and replace it with carefully phrased psycho-babble.

MacArthur's Vietnam-era contemporaries were of ten more interested in themselves than in their country. Or they were more interested in bad-mouthing their country's policies, publicly causing bitter hate and dissension



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Gen. Douglas MacArthur

Nastiness and pettiness have always been part of the political process — i.e., whenever two or more people disagree — but, until recently, the military has been mostly exempt from such vulgar displays. When sucked into political debates by miscreants who always cite the isolated example as the norm, the new military types almost always lose. When there's an effort from a national press that sees nothing wrong with manufacturing news to prove its suppositions — as in Jayson Blair, Dan Rather, and several *New York Times* pieces — the public tends to forget about the news story and about the "perp," and mentally castigates the victim of the hoax.

Process Hurts Military Men

Our young warfighters these days are cut from the same pattern as their grandfathers and fathers from various Bands of Brothers. They're doing just fine and will continue to do so despite the continual buzz generated by the journalistic equivalent of those who grossly exaggerate stories to prove a personal viewpoint.

And, as the old-guard generation of aging hippies and the anti-war zealots of the mainstream media loudly fade away, may a bright, eloquent star such as Col. H. R. McMaster, the commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, or several of his cohorts, appear on the scene to rekindle the spirit of the fading away of Douglas MacArthur.

Maybe that's what Gen. MacArthur meant by Old Soldiers never dying.

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WASHINGTON'S CAUTION

Support for Veterans Remains High, But More Can Be Done

Senator George Allen often cites George Washington's caution that "the willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation."

How well is our nation treating veterans as we fight the War on Terror that military leaders say "we can't afford to lose"? Can our young people believe their service will be appreciated? While some will claim we can do better, the nation is meeting this challenge.

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Veterans have enjoyed varying levels of support over the years. Since 2001, Congress and President George Bush have given unprecedented support for veterans' programs with funding matching veterans' needs. The President's 2007 budget for the Veterans Administration (VA) is \$80.6 billion, or \$8.8 billion above 2006, making it the largest increase in discretionary funding for the VA ever requested by any President. Compared with 2001, the 2007 budget represents a 75-percent increase in funding. For veterans' medical care alone, the budget

calls for \$34.3 billion, an increase of nearly 70 percent in five years.

The funding increases are having an impact. A major priority for the VA is providing the troops returning home from war with a seamless transition from active-force medical care to care as a veteran. Since 2001, nearly a million more veteran patients have been able to use the VA system, with first priority given to veterans with service-connected disabilities.

Progress Has Been Made

The VA is also working to meet the challenge of increased demand. With the increase in active-duty forces, including National Guard and Reserve, claims have greatly increased, reaching 780,000 in 2005 alone. Despite the increase, the VA has driven down claims waiting to be processed from 432,000 in 2002 to 365,000 at the start of 2006, with average processing time dropping from 223 to 167 days — still too long, but significant progress.

Are there still challenges? Looking at the budget, one can always point to where increases can be made — the need for more Veteran Care Centers and cemeteries, improvements in specialties, and information security, etc. But progress is being made, with states such as Virginia leading the way to ensure veterans are getting access to the VA services they need.

Volunteer help from citizen groups, particularly from veterans' service organizations, rounds out veterans' support efforts. There are so many that do so much. Colonial Heights American Legion Post 284 exemplifies some of the longstanding efforts that make a difference on a personal level. The Post's hospital visitation program has been going on for years with a van full of Legionnaires going to McGuire Hospital every Sunday to assist veterans from the wards to attend services, a great kindness and a source of comfort to so many.

Opportunities for Private Citizens

There are also opportunities for private citizens such as you and me to help. While Congress, led by our own Senator George Allen, increased the death "benefit" from a paltry \$12,000 to \$100,000, that still does not address the impact of the loss of a mother or father in the War on Terror. College expenses are a challenge for most families and are a particular challenge for families who have lost a member in service.

The Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), the nation's fourth-largest veterans' group, has established the American Patriot Scholarship Fund to support families of veterans lost in active service. To help raise \$1 million for Patriot Scholarships, Col. Brad Smith, a stage-4 cancer survivor and active Army officer, will hike the 2,174-mile Ap-

palachian Trail. We can support his efforts by pledging as little as one cent for each mile Col. Smith walks. If he completes the trail, it works out to a \$21.74 donation. I hope you will join me in being a part of this effort to support our nation's commitment to those left behind. To make a pledge log onto www.virginiamoaa.com and click on "Smith Hike." There is no better time than July 4 to contribute and heed George Washington's call for support of our veterans.

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson summarized America's support for veterans: "Veterans are an American priority at every level of government. No other country in the world approaches the level of the United States in supporting its military veterans. President Bush is committed to affirming President Lincoln's charge 'to care for them who shall have borne the battle.'"

Let's all do our part.

■ Bill Flanagan — a retired Army Colonel and Vietnam veteran, with an Army son and USMC son-in-law engaged in the War on Terror — has served on the Virginia War Memorial Foundation's Board of Trustees, is the president of the state leadership of the Military Officers Association of America, and is a member of several other veterans' organizations. His *Commentary Columns* regarding veterans appear regularly on the Back Fence.